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ABSTRACT

The earliest years, for one individual growing up on the coast of Ecuador representing one of the few English-speaking inhabitants, sowed the seeds of cultural literacy. Spanish and English were taught simultaneously and religion took on a large role. The Bible was taught by parents, who also read aloud, sang songs, and told stories to the children. At age 6, this young person's cultural literacy experience expanded after moving to Quito, Ecuador to study at a boarding school. Here, many opportunities arose for interaction with Ecuadoreans of every social class and race. Later the family moved to the United States and settled down in Indiana, where the children were enrolled in grade school and high school. This new environment and way of life allowed this maturing young woman to see her own musical talent flower and critical thinking skills develop. After finishing high school, married life and adjusting to motherhood were not far off in the woman's future. Upon settling down, the woman was eager to impart her experiential knowledge and acquired perspective on literacy to her own children. Eventually, continuing on this "literacy journey," the woman not only became the first member of the family to earn a college degree, but also proved to be an exemplary scholar, graduating with highest honors. (NKA)

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Multiple Literacies: A Pilgrimage in Which My Family Figures Prominently

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Laurel Reinking

Multiple Literacies: A Pilgrimage in Which My Family Figures Prominently

My grandma used to tell the story of how at not-quite-two-years-old I could quote--by memory and in order--all the names of the books of the Bible. It was not until a few years ago, however, while I was reading Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, the story of his own multi-dimensionally-disadvantaged childhood, that it dawned on me that, in contrast to the neglect lavished on Rose by his parents, my parents had invested hours and hours working with me, going over and over those names. And even more astonishing to me is how in the world they ever motivated a one-year-old to memorize a list of sixty-six names, most of which are very uncommon.

Grandma's story, I think, reveals the nature of my literacy narrative, a quest for meaning, a pilgrimage of multiple literacies shaped by family traditions and by caring, educated role models--quality individuals personally invested in my narrative. My story begins on Limones, an island on the Pacific coast of Ecuador, South America, where my father, my mother, myself and later my baby brother lived as the only white people and as the only English language speakers. In Limones the seeds of my multiple literacies--cultural, lingual, musical, intellectual and relational--were planted. Limones was a muddy island where because the water covered it every day at high tide, houses were built above the ground, an island where the only communication with the outside world was by a little sea-going boat that arrived once each week to deliver mail

and other cargo, an island where the drinking water came from the communal well and where each family's toilet was a log in the backyard on which family members could squat to relieve themselves, an island where illiteracy, superstition, disease and poverty were the norm, and an island in whose culture I lived thoroughly immersed. I visited, worshiped and even played with the Limonesenos. In fact, for the first five years of my life my best friends were the little black children of Limones.

Had my parents isolated me, feared that I would succumb to disease or cultural deprivation, I would have missed an unparalleled opportunity to explore a rich, diverse cultural literacy, and I would have missed the opportunity to develop a relational literacy through which I have learned to value individuals, not by their language or race or nationality or skin color, but rather by each individual's unique character qualities. Furthermore, I would have missed the opportunity to learn to speak Spanish at the same time that I learned to speak English.

> *There is now evidence that children who grow up in an environment in which more than one language is spoken tend to have an intellectual advantage over those children who grow up in a one-language environment.*[1]

Rather than having an intellectually and culturally impoverished childhood, mine was intellectually and culturally enriched. My parents read to me, sang to me, told me stories. For the first five years of my life I was always with

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[1]Cataldi (1994) and Diaz (1985) argue that, for example, fluency in two languages contributes to mental flexibility, ability to conceptualize, and increased metalinguistic awareness.

at least one of my parents. And I would have early on seen my parents diligently studying to learn Spanish, conscientiously preparing sermons and lessons for the various worship services, and enthusiastically writing and reading the ubiquitous letters that were our only form of communication with the outside world. Undoubtedly, their modeling is one reason that, as my mother tells it, I would spend hours sitting in my little rocking chair, "reading" books.

I remember those early years dimly. I see them as sepia photographs, faded glimpses, impressions of the years that formed the foundation to my literacy story.

My first really concrete memory of a learning experience is when I was five years old: My mother is teaching me. She and I are walking together outside. She is showing me our shadows and explaining to me how shadows are formed. Later, my mother hides around the school room flash cards with letters of the alphabet on them. I find them and read the letter. I reach for a card that I find on a window sill. My mother screams. I jerk my hand back. There, hidden by the curtain, is a small, extremely poisonous snake. Some men rush into the room from outside and kill the snake.

Education, although fun, is not always without perils.

I am six, and it is time for me to go to first grade. Our mission does not allow parents to home-school their children, so I must go to Quito, Ecuador, to the Alliance Academy, a boarding school supported by the Alliance Mission. My mother acts very wisely, and, though her heart is breaking, she

tells me how delighted she and my father are that I have been accepted as a student by the Alliance Academy. She tells me that this wonderful opportunity is an answer to prayer. I never doubt her. I never see a tear. I only see that she is pleased that I will have an exceptional education.

And I do have an exceptional education. I live in Quito in a boarding house with about twenty other children ranging in age from six to eighteen. Our housemother treats us firmly but kindly. Every night after supper we study at the tables in the dining room until it is time for the younger children to go to bed. Then we all gather in the living room around the fireplace. There, our housemother, Marylou McCully, reads us a chapter from one of *The Sugar Creek Gang* books. *The Sugar Creek Gang* is a series similar to *The Hardy Boys* or *Nancy Drew* except that it has an added Christian element. I live the twenty-four hours from one night to the next in limbo with the boys from Sugar Creek, anxiously waiting to find out what is going to happen to Little Jim and Big Jim and all their friends.

Sometimes we all work on memorizing some scripture. "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing *this*, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. . . ." I can still quote James, Chapter One, from the King James Version of the Bible--a chapter I learned sitting by a fireplace in the living room of that boarding house in Quito, Ecuador.

That living room is also where I practice the piano for one-half hour each day. You see, I come from a musical family. Mom is a classical pianist. She has

a lovely, trained soprano voice. Dad plays the cornet and the accordion. He loves to sing and has a beautiful tenor voice. He and Mom frequently sing duets. Consequently and inevitably, when I turned five, my mother formalized my relationship with the piano. Those lessons were the beginning of my musical literacy.

Research indicates that, generally speaking,
studying music enhances intellectual development. [2]

My cultural literacy expands in Quito. The Alliance Academy is a minimalist, functional complex with several single and two-story buildings surrounded by sparsely landscaped grounds enclosed within a high, faded-pink adobe wall. The Academy sits at the foot of Pichincha, a dormant Andean volcano that situates itself in my world like a friendly giant in my backyard. In Quito, the capital of Ecuador, I have many opportunities to interact with Ecuadoreans of every social class and race. Quito, a Spanish colonial city founded in 1534, is a rich mixture of wealthy individuals with pure Spanish blood, a middle class with mixed Spanish and indigenous people's blood, and the very poor native peoples, the ubiquitous Quechuas, who live in and around Quito.

In the kitchen of my boarding house, as I chat with the married couple and their daughter who house keep and cook for us and who live in a tiny, two-room adobe cottage in the backyard of the boardinghouse, I learn about the life of the serving class. I buy "popsicles" and hand-crafted souvenirs from the

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[2]Rauscher and Shaw (1997) found that music training helps to form the neural connections used for abstract reasoning.

Quecha men and women who park their hand-pushed carts outside the Academy, waiting for the foreign children to spend their allowances during recess. With my parents I visit and eat with the Casares, a family from the upper class of society where proper etiquette and old-world tradition reigns, where dinner is served by maids at 10:00 P.M. My world view expands.

Years later, as I reflect on the contrast between my life and that of Mike Rose, I am struck--absolutely overwhelmed--by the quality of education I received at the Alliance Academy. My classes were small. My teachers were all missionaries whose stated purpose in life was to serve God and to serve others. They were devoted to us. My peers *all* came from stable families with two well-educated parents--many with their doctorates in linguistics, many medical doctors. Now imagine this--every student in the school comes from a stable, two-parent family in which both parents are well-educated. Every student is supported, not only by his own immediate family, but also by his extended family in the United States and by the members of his home church. A host of individuals who are actively involved in my life, support me financially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Personal support greatly enriches one's literacy pilgrimage.

I am twelve and my life changes drastically. My mother is ill, and we leave Ecuador and return permanently to the United States. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, we live next door to my grandparents, my mother's parents, and I attend Harrison Hill, the premier junior high at the time. I think that I suffer from a

little culture shock. After all, *Ecuador* is my home. But I have no trouble fitting in educationally. I am X-laned (placed in the college track), and once again family tradition affects my life: I begin to play the violin in the school orchestra. My grandpa played the violin, my mother played the violin, and now it is my turn to play grandpa's beautiful violin. So, in addition to my piano lessons, I take private violin lessons from Olga Mittlestadt, a violinist in the Fort Wayne Philharmonic.

In ninth grade we read Hamlet, and I am the one person in class who has no trouble understanding Shakespeare. Why? Shakespeare writes in the language of the King James Bible, a language with which I am extremely familiar. Latin is not difficult. My Spanish is a big help. Because I have memorized many chapters from the Bible, I have no trouble memorizing the poetry for English class: "Tell me not in mournful numbers life is but an empty dream, . . ," memorized in seventh grade, still remembered.

I have read that memorization works
like Miracle Grow on those little gray cells.[3]

During my junior high and high school years, thanks to my father, my critical thinking further develops. Whether my father is with our immediate family, with our extended family, or with friends, he is constantly discussing politics and theology. The gist of what he says is, "On the one hand, this is what *they* say. On the other hand, this is what *we* believe. These are the issues on

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[3]Kieran Egan (1988, 1990) links memorization and creativity.

which we differ, and here are my arguments pro and con." Dad shows me how to think critically, an essential element to my literacy narrative.

Grandpa and Grandma influence my perspective on teaching. They model patience. Grandma teaches me to sew and to bake. But she doesn't just *tell* me. She *shows* me. As I look on, she reads aloud the instructions for a dress pattern. I watch as she cuts the fabric. Then she guides me as I cut. She shows me how to sew the seams. She is never too busy to work with me on whatever project I want to tackle. Grandpa shows me how to drive a car. He tells me, "Pull the car forward, right next to the other car's door. Now, turn the steering wheel to the left. . . ." He takes his time and is extremely patient with me. To this day I have no problem parallel parking--because Grandpa *showed* me how.

The high school years contain a series of events that contribute to my cultural, musical, intellectual and relational literacies. I have precious memories of my mother and me, just the two of us, regularly attending the Fort Wayne Philharmonic. We would attend the concert, and then afterwards maybe we would go for a hot-fudge sundae. Ah! Those years of my pilgrimage were such smooth sailing!

Dad, Mom, Grandpa, Grandma--they all show me that an effective teacher models and invests in her student with her time and with her patience: an essential lesson for my literacy journey.

When I begin to rear my children, I continue the traditions of literacy begun in my childhood. Now, much of my own pilgrimage involves enabling my

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children to begin their own literacy journeys. I encourage them by sharing, teaching, showing. I love reading to my children. One day, browsing in a bookstore in the mall, I find George MacDonald's *The Princess and The Goblin.* I rush home to excitedly tell my daughter how I have longed to find this book. I read it to her. I read it to her again and again. She loves it as much as I ever did. When she is in high school I read her Jane Austen. I read to Rachel until she leaves home.

I love singing to my children. I sing songs my mother sang to me: "One day as I was riding on the subway (my high, silk hat, my high, silk hat)," sung to the tune of *Funiculi, Funiculae.* I sing the song the mother of my roommate, Mica Streich, taught me--*Johnny Rebeck,* a song from the Pennsylvania Dutch. Or I sing in Spanish to my daughter: "La lavandera pasa . . . ."

I home school my daughter for her seventh grade year. I love teaching her. My purpose is for her to learn, so we focus on learning, not on grades. At the end of the year she tests way ahead of her peers.

Throughout the years my children are at home, I work part-time and continue my literacy pilgrimage as I study needlepoint, piano, the book of *Romans,* and business courses offered at an insurance company. And all these years I hold on to the dream that down the road my pilgrimage will lead back to college where I will pursue my undergraduate degree. You see, for many years I was the only member of my immediate family with no college degree. My father has a Master's degree in Education from Indiana University and a

Doctorate in Ministry. My mother graduated in 1946 from Fort Wayne Bible College. My brother Stephen has an undergraduate degree in Education and a Master's degree in Counseling. My baby brother Rudy is a college graduate and an ordained minister. No one exerted any pressure on me to return to the university, but the year that Rachel left home to attend The University of Dayton, Grandma turned 90. At her birthday party she said, "I intend to never stop learning." I thought, "I am *half* her age. I could live for another forty-five years! *What am I going to do with the rest of my life?* I need to prepare myself to be of service to God and to society."

I had arrived at a fork in my journey where I chose to follow a road (the road of arts and letters) that, in comparison to the earlier years of my pilgrimage, has been more difficult. Sometimes it seems as if my life at the university is an impossible quest taking me up mountains and through wildernesses. I study long and hard. I read and reread. Writing takes me forever. I have sacrificed a clean house and a trim, firm body to continue my literacy journey, a journey in which I recently passed another milestone: In 1998 I graduated with Highest Honors.

Yes, my pilgrimage is rewarding. Learning, reading, sharing, teaching, modeling--all benefit me. My pilgrimage keeps my mind active and refreshes my spirit; but most important, I find significance in the wise choices I make, choices that are available to me because I am literate.

A literacy pilgrimage is paradoxical in that it is a quest for meaning in which meaning is found in the quest itself.

Even as wise people who love me--positive role models have led me throughout my pilgrimage of multiple literacies, even so, today I choose to enable other travelers to become literate so that they too can find meaning and purpose.

Each individual's literacy pilgrimage is interrelational.

As I share the story of my pilgrimage of multiple literacies with my children, with my IPFW mentee, with my international clients in the Writing Center, and with the Spanish students I tutor, I discern from their choices, from their increased sense of purpose, that *I* am now the caring, role model who shows them that meaning is found in a literacy pilgrimage.

My journey continues.

A literacy pilgrimage is also paradoxical

in that as the pilgrim gives away that which she has been given,

she receives even more in return.